Georgia Archives

Case Study

The Digital Records Center as a Preservation Tool

Executive Summary

- **Goals:**
  1. To test different methods for capturing historical digital records.
  2. To develop a method of capturing historical records early in their lifecycle to ensure their preservation.
- **Timetable for planning and implementing the project:** Initial planning and high level design required approximately 3 person weeks. Acquisition and installation required an additional week for the pilot application. Expansion of the pilot is currently being explored and evaluated.
- **Costs of project:** Costs figures for pulling the pilot into a full production environment (beyond a single agency) were not available for this case study but planning and design have of necessity lead us in the direction of low life-time costs to maximize the return on investment for the state.
- **For more information on this project:** http://www.sos.state.ga.us/archives/who_are_we/rims/digital_History/default.htm

INTRODUCTION

Archives and records programs have traditionally operated paper records centers as part of an overall program to encourage economy and efficiency in government record keeping. As state government has relied more and more on electronic processes to conduct business, paper records centers will slowly become a thing of the past. But, can the concept of a records center have a place in e-government? As the Archives has studied ways to identify, acquire, and preserve the historical electronic records being created, the concept of a Digital Records Center has emerged as one possible means of achieving our goals. Working with the Board of Pardons and Paroles on a project funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the Archives is examining the contents of long-term case files and determining if permanent information can be identified and preserved. The idea of a Digital Records Center is being evaluated as part of this project to discover the potential it has for capturing and enabling the preservation of permanent information embedded within large groups of temporary records.

PRESERVATION OF RECORDS IN A PAPER ENVIRONMENT

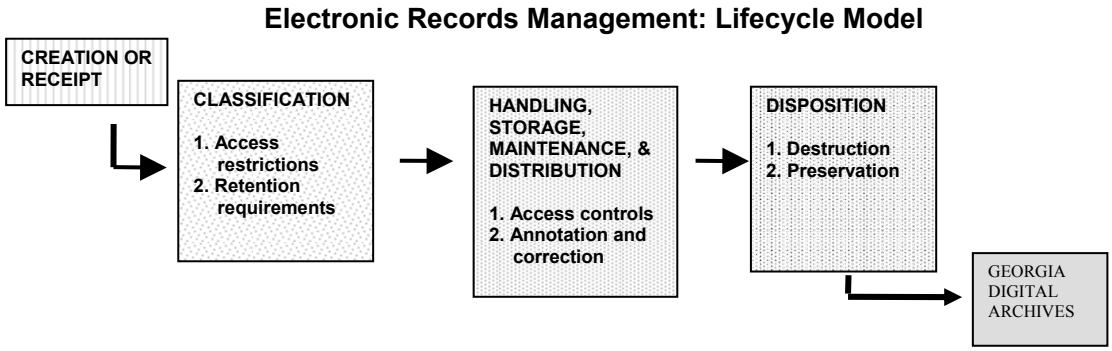
Traditionally, permanent paper records are transferred to an archives after a long period of maintenance and use within the creating agency . Records might be decades old before they are sent to the archives. Luckily, paper is a forgiving medium for information storage that, barring a disaster or deliberate destruction, can survive years of benign neglect. Unfortunately, electronic records are far less forgiving. The collaborative grant project with the Board of Pardons and Paroles has allowed the Georgia Archives the opportunity to explore several methods of 'acquiring' permanent digital records (including transfer of copies to the Archives on physical media or via FTP). One method that holds promise is the storage of long-term and permanent agency records in a records management application where the work group server resides with the agency and the data store resides with the Archives. This is the Digital Records Center concept. This case study evaluates the potential of this last acquisition method and considers its potential for enabling the Archives to capture and preserve permanent electronic records.

DIGITAL RECORDS CENTER

A common thread in professional literature is the need of archives to shift from a passive to an active involvement in the creation of electronic records. Participation in the design of information systems has been the goal of most state archival programs. Unfortunately, this is not always an option. The concept of a Digital Records Center, particularly as it applies to the storage and access of digital images, allows an archives to intervene in the middle of a records lifecycle to capture and secure permanent records, even if the archives is not present at the design stage.

For the state of Georgia, the electronic records lifecycle has been defined as containing four major steps: creation and receipt; classfication; handling, storage, maintenance, and distribution; and disposition. This lifecycle model is the product of a previous grant project to work with state government agencies in identifying concerns for protecting confidential information within electronic records. The project, Privacy and Access in Georgia E-Government, identified federal and state legislation impacting access to records and developed a series of recommendations for addressing confidentiality of data within a variety of electronic records found in Georgia government. The lifecycle model, shown below in Figure I, was used as a tool in the development of procedural and process recommendations for confidential information.

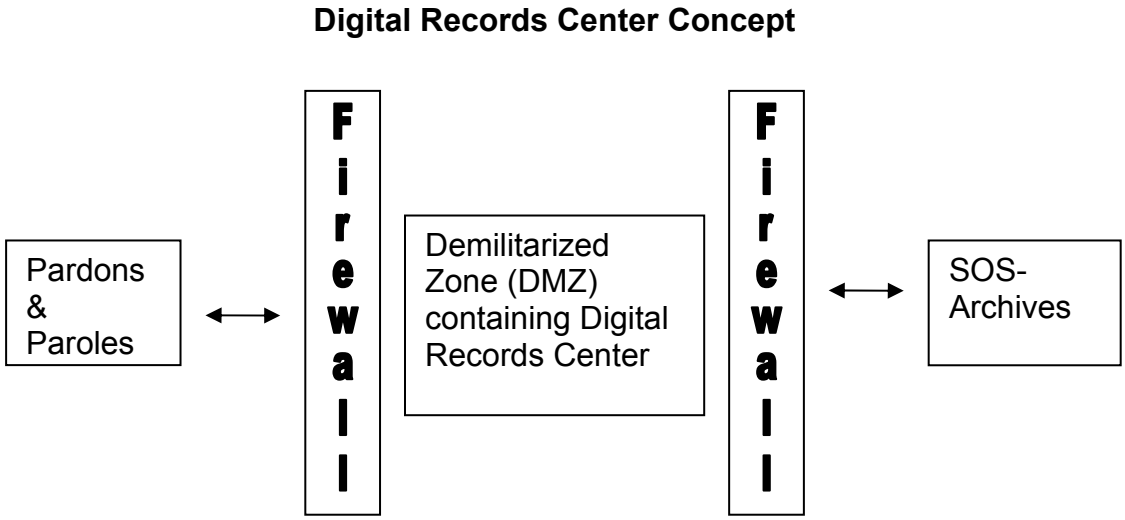
Figure 1.



The Digital Records Center concept intervenes during the handling, storage, maintenance and distribution stage of the model to transfer records into the physical custody of the Archives. The official record remains in the Digital Records Center at all times with the agency accessing a copy of the original for its day-to-day work. Individual documents within the group of records may have different retention periods ranging for short-term temporary to long-term temporary to permanent. As retention periods are met, individual documents are destroyed until at last only the permanent information remains. This information

is transferred into the Digital Archives for preservation. At this point, the agency would access its records through the Digital Archives web portal.

Figure 2.



The above Figure 2 provides an illustration of the Digital Records Center. The Digital Records Center itself would exist in a domain outside of agency networks in a demilitarized zone or DMZ. It would be surrounded by firewalls. Access is provided via an approved set of IP addresses. The DMZ would be adminstered by the Archives with the agency storing records within it. After a set period of time, agreed upon by both the Archives and the agency, permanent records would move from the Digital Records Center into a separate Digital Archives environment.

BENEFITS AND LIABILITIES

As the Archives and its partner agency, the Board of Pardons and Paroles, have progressed in this grant project, both have carefully weighed the benefits and liabilities of the project. Identified benefits and liabilities are listed in the below table.

Benefits and Liabilities

Benefit	Liability
Enables intervention in records lifecycle to ensure preservation of archival records	Impact of budgetary requirements on already strained Archives budget
Forces collection of key metadata for permanent records	Need to acquire new skills sets in Archives and Records staff
Solution can be replicated multiple times with different government agencies	Possible growth could outstrip Archives ability to manage data
Takes burden of long-term records storage off agency shoulders	Applicable to a limited variety of electronic records – primarily images, word processing files, spreadsheets, and email
Existing records center operates on cost recovery basis – could provide partial solution to financial sustainability	Could an e-Records Center operate on the same basis? How will fees be charged? On aggregate amount of records (terabytes) or individual numbers of documents?
Allows opportunity to address confidentiality concerns in advance of transfer to Digital Archives	

One question has been answered – can the concept of a records center have a place in e-government? Yes. The concept of a Digital Records Center should definitely be considered as a viable and valuable tool as the Archives moves forward in its construction of a Digital Archives for the state of Georgia. Though, it is likely to have a limited clientiele of agencies – those whose records we are unwilling to risk, such as those of the Governor and the General Assembly – it's benefits as an information management tool in the identification and preservation of permanent electronic records cannot be ignored.